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ABSTRACT

A number of factors have come together to generate a renewed interest in adult learning in Organization for Economic Cooperation Development (OECD) countries, including emphasis on demand shifts associated with technology and globalization; large size of skills needs; and aging population. Major gaps in knowledge about adult learning still hinder effective diagnosis and policymaking. What is encompassed by "adult learning" is not clearly defined. Statistical evidence on reasons why adults participate in learning is negative; more is known about what does not work than what does. Participants are more likely to be already well-educated or well-trained individuals. Too, the benefits of adult learning are not always clear. On the policy side, the OECD does not know how transposable good practices in adult learning are between countries. It needs to be able to identify not only what works, but for whom, and in what circumstances. The OECD work program is working on both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of adult learning. On the quantitative front, the OECD is involved in preparing new data collections on assessments of adult skills. On the qualitative side, it is involved in the Definition and Selection of Competencies project that aims to identify key competencies needed in the workplace and society and is analyzing policy options and practices under the umbrella of the Thematic Review of Adult Learning. (YLB)

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International Conference on Adult Learning Policies

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"Adult Learning at the OECD – Will Cinderella Get to the Ball?"

by

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* I am very grateful to Patrick Werquin for all his help with this speech.

CE082 986

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Minister Han, President Kang, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today to open this important conference. I would like to begin by expressing my thanks to President Kang for agreeing to co-host this event with us and for all the assistance which his colleagues at KRIVET have given to us in preparing for it.

My opening remarks will touch briefly on three issues: i) Why the renewed interest in adult learning; ii) What we know and do not know about adult learning in OECD countries; and iii) What we are doing at OECD in order to fill the knowledge gaps and further the policy debate on adult learning.

1. Why the renewed interest in adult learning?

Adult learning, it is fair to say, has been the Cinderella of lifelong learning systems in most OECD countries up until now. Even though the notion of *permanent* or *recurrent education* was given much prominence in the 1960s and early 1970s, most policy attention and investment since then has focused on the school system, the transition from school-to-work and tertiary education systems. But there are encouraging signs that Cinderella may get to the ball after all, as many countries are turning their attention to adult learning again.

Box 1. Recent examples of initiatives on adult learning

A few examples of this renewed interest in putting adult learning programmes into practice, include:

- In Switzerland, they are currently preparing a bill on *continuous vocational training*.
- In Sweden, an extensive five-year programme, called the *Adult Education Initiative*, was launched in 1997 with the aim of putting the adult learning system at the forefront of the education scene.
- The United Kingdom has been reforming its adult learning system for over two years; this has included the creation of the *Learning and Skills Council*.
- Portugal has recently implemented a system for the recognition of prior learning. A network of Centres have been set up to help workers without formal qualification have their relevant skills recognised.
- Spain is in the process of passing a new vocational training bill that will include a range of new possibilities for adult learners, including the recognition of informal competencies.

A number of factors have come together to generate this renewed interest in adult learning, and encourage governments to wave their magic wand at Cinderella (see Box 1 for some recent examples).

First and foremost, I would put the emphasis on demand shifts associated with technology and globalisation. The OECD *Growth Project* has highlighted the importance of skill-

biased technical change as a factor in growth and development. In response to these shifts, the occupational composition of the workforce has shifted towards white-collar, high-skilled employment (Figure 1). This has increased the pressure on adult learning systems to help adult workers whose existing skills are not in line with market demands, and to promote continuous skill upgrading.

Second, the size of these needs is large. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) has clearly shown that, in terms of literacy skills, even in the most advanced OECD countries a large fraction of the adult population does not reach the minimum/desirable level to function effectively in today's economy and society (Figure 2).

Finally, population ageing is another major driver of change. By 2005, more than one out of three workers will be aged over 45 in OECD countries. Hence, a large fraction of the working population will have left the initial education and training system more than 20 years earlier. Consequently, our societies will need to invest much more in helping these adults refresh their skills.

2. What do we know and not know about adult learning in OECD countries?

Despite the renewed interest in adult learning in many OECD countries, our understanding of Cinderella's situation is less than ideal. There are still major gaps in our knowledge about adult learning which hinder effective diagnosis and policy-making, and I want to draw attention to some of them.

2.1. The definitional problem

It is extremely difficult to measure participation rates in adult education with reasonable precision because there is no clear definition of what is encompassed by the term "adult learning". An example will suffice to illustrate the problem. When the OECD Thematic Review team visited Canada, they were given the following information: The participation rate in 1998 according to the Adult Education and Training Survey – which covered all sorts of learning activities for adults – was 27.7%. However, the same year the New Approach to Lifelong Learning Survey (NALL) revealed that 96.7% of Canadians feel that they do some sort of informal learning in their everyday life. The truth probably lies somewhere between 28 % and 97 % – an enormous range and very telling about the difficulty of measuring adult learning outside the formal settings.

Despite the difficulty of the task, the IALS has provided some basis for cross-country comparisons (Table 1). The Nordic countries rank at the top of the league as far as all types of training are concerned; Poland and Portugal at the bottom. However, when only on-the-job training is considered, although the Nordic countries still stand at the top of the rank, other OECD countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand are not far behind.

Table 1: Participation in learning of 25-64 year-olds according to type of training and job status, IALS, 1994-1998, (%)

	All Job Status	Employed	Unemployed	Out of the Labour Force
All type of training				
Germany	18.1	23.2	26.7	6.9
Australia	35.6	42.2	28.3	16.1
Belgium (Flanders)	21.5	26.8	*16.6	9.8
Canada	36.4	41.9	30.1	23.1
Chile	19.1	22.9	22.9	11.1
Denmark	56.2	60.7	51.1	39.0
United States	41.5	48.5	*30.2	16.9
Finland	58.2	69.9	29.4	32.1
Hungary	18.1	27.7	*9.5	*2.2
Ireland	22.0	29.4	*8.6	14.5
Netherlands	36.3	43.2	38.8	21.8
Norway	48.4	54.1	*33.2	21.8
New Zealand	46.4	53.1	31.4	29.7
Poland	14.1	20.5	*7.9	2.8
Portugal	13.0	16.7	*9.8	*4.7
Czech Republic	27.2	33.5	*14.3	7.8
United Kingdom	44.9	56.0	33.1	14.3
Slovenia	33.3	42.9	*13.7	10.5
Switzerland	41.5	45.7	32.3	27.3
Sweden	54.3	60.1	45.6	28.7
Average	*34.9*	*42.8*	*26.4*	*13.6*
Job-related training**				
Germany	14.9	20.1	25.1	*3.1
Australia	30.3	38.1	23.8	6.9
Belgium (Flanders)	14.0	19.8	*8.6	*0.9
Canada	29.6	37.5	22.0	9.9
Chile	11.7	17.0	*9.3	*2.5
Denmark	48.7	54.6	38.8	26.9
United States	37.6	45.2	*28.5	10.1
Finland	40.0	51.1	*11.6	15.8
Hungary	12.8	19.8	*6.1	*1.4
Ireland	15.8	23.5	*7.1	6.6
Netherlands	24.1	32.5	*29.4	5.9
Norway	44.4	50.9	*26.7	14.5
New Zealand	38.4	46.9	24.1	16.3
Poland	10.6	16.5	*2.4	1.1
Portugal	-	-	-	-
Czech Republic	21.7	27.3	*11.9	*4.4
United Kingdom	39.7	51.8	24.0	7.0
Slovenia	25.6	34.4	*9.1	*4.4
Switzerland	26.3	31.8	*26.9	6.0
Sweden	-	-	-	-
Average	*29.3*	*37.6*	*21.4*	*6.9*

Source : IALS (prepared by the Secretariat).
* Less than 30 cases in the cell.
** Not available for Portugal and Sweden.

2.2. What motivates adults to participate in learning?

There is some statistical evidence available on the reasons why adults participate, or not, in adult learning. However, this evidence is rather negative: we know more about what does not work than we know about what does.

For instance, money and subsidies are not always the key factors in providing incentives for adults to resume learning. We are not exactly sure what are the best incentives, but we do know that free learning does not always trigger interest among the target population. There is a lot of evidence whereby a programme was provided, a classroom, course content and a teacher were available, but no (or few) adults showed up. The reasons why the adults did not participate in these programmes are not clear but several explanations are plausible: the needs of the adults were not met, the scheduling was inappropriate vis-à-vis other demands on their time, or the support services were either inappropriate or not available.

Once again, IALS provides us with some suggestive evidence. Table 2 shows that lack of time is cited by adults as the main reason why they did not participate in learning activities even when they expressed a wish to do so. This suggests that one major factor to consider, if we want to convince adults to resume learning, is scheduling of courses – whether it is for general or for vocational reasons.

Table 2 - Reasons for non participation in learning activities, IALS, 1994-1998, (%)

		Job-related training	Other Type of Training
Wanted to learn but could not		21,7	18,1
Reasons for not participating:			
Time constraints:	Lack of time	**38,8**	**52,6**
	Too busy at work	16,3	14,2
	Family responsibility	15,4	14,9
Type of training:	Course not offered	7,1	3,6
	No money	25,9	19,3
	Inconvenient time	9	7,2
	Language reasons	0,9	0,4
Personal Reasons:	Lack of employer support	7,6	0,4
	Health	2,6	4
	Lack of Qualifications	1,3	0,3
Other		9,2	5,5

Sources : IALS (prepared by the Secretariat).

2.3 Who participates in adult learning?

The answer to this question can be summarised in the well-known quote from St. Matthew: "To them that hath shall be given!" In this context, there is abundant evidence showing that already well-educated/trained individuals benefit more from adult learning than their less-educated/trained peers. Trying to achieve greater equality of opportunity and to motivate the less-educated/trained adults to avail of learning opportunities is a major task for policy-makers. It is, as will become evident over the next three days' discussions, a prime focus in the OECD Thematic Review of Adult Learning.

2.4. The benefits of adult learning are not always clear

There is a widespread belief that many adults do not participate in learning activities because the incentives and motivations for both individuals and employers to invest resources in learning are not strong enough. The existence of positive "externalities" to adult education and training is widely recognised. Market arrangements often fail to

capture these "externalities" and, as a consequence, individuals and firms under-invest and spend less than the rate of return would warrant.

Unfortunately, the existing cross-country literature on the returns to adult learning is not very extensive as compared with the one on the incentives to invest in tertiary education. There are also serious concerns that this literature fails to measure adequately the full range of costs and benefits associated with adult learning.

2.5. The most glaring gaps in our knowledge of adult learning

We know little about public and private spending on adult learning activities as distinct from public spending on other parts of education and training systems. Therefore, it is impossible to know exactly how much a country is spending on adult learning alone – in volume or in proportion to GDP. As a consequence, it is very difficult to assess the political commitment of governments to the adult learning system.

On the policy side, we still do not know how transposable good practices in adult learning are between countries. We need to be able to identify not only what works, but for whom, and in what circumstances, if we want Cinderella to get to the ball on time.

In order to overcome these gaps, the OECD has a significant work programme underway on adult learning.

3. The OECD work programme on adult learning

We are working on both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of adult learning. On the quantitative front, the OECD is involved in preparing new data collections on assessments of adult skills:

- The Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL) will draw on IALS and push forward our knowledge of adults' competencies.
- OECD Education Ministers, when they met in Paris in April of this year, gave us a mandate to launch a reflection on a new international adult skills assessment to follow on from, and extend, the range of skills surveyed in IALS and ALLs. We have just begun this process which could lead eventually to a new international survey on adult skills, to be implemented in several years time.

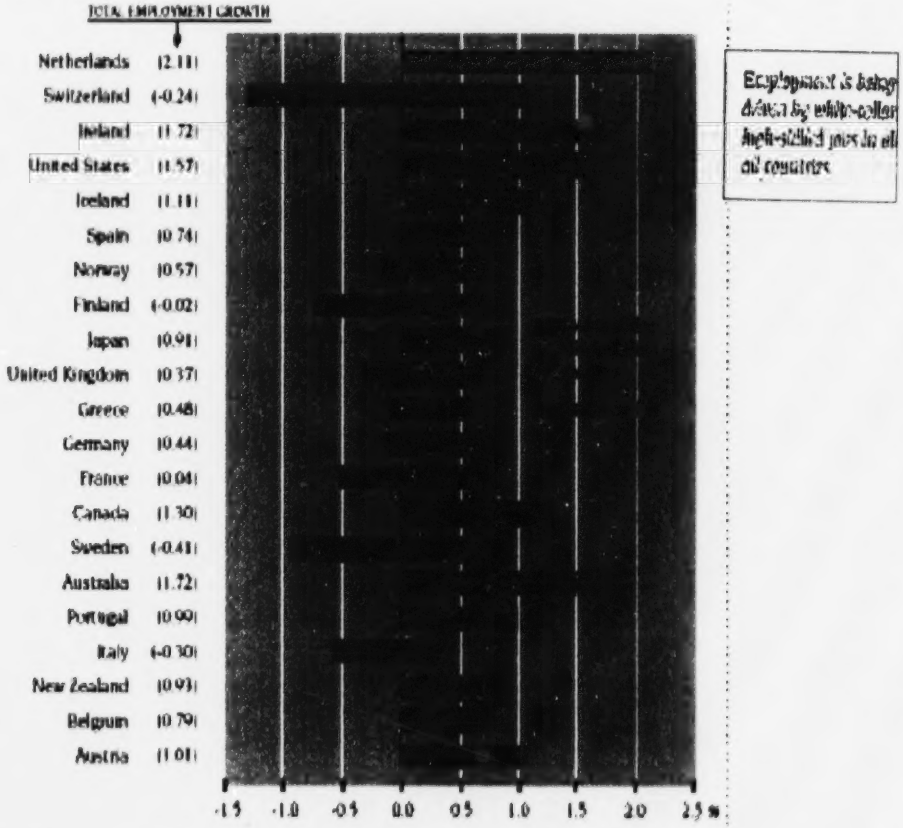
On the qualitative side, we are involved with the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and the US National Center for Education Statistics in a project called the Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) which aims to identify the key competencies needed in the workplace and society. We are also analysing policy options and practices under the umbrella of the Thematic Review of Adult Learning (TRAL) which will be described and discussed over the next three days. The main objectives of the thematic review are to:

- Describe the patterns of participation and non-participation in adult learning;
- Diagnose the problems that arise because of these patterns;
- Describe policy programmes and institutional arrangements that have been used by Member countries, expanding learning opportunities for adults;

- Describe options that can be regarded as "good practices" under diverse institutional circumstances and analyse how these can be applied more widely within and across countries.

In conclusion, I hope that our discussions and the ambitious work programme we have underway at OECD will help OECD countries develop a more effective magic wand to ensure that the Cinderella of the lifelong learning system finally gets to the ball.

Figure 1. Upskilling in total employment growth, 1980-98
Average annual percentage change in total employment



Countries are ranked in descending order of average annual percentage growth in white-collar high-skilled workers

Source: ILO database (2000) and OECD (1998), *Technology, Productivity and Job Creation*
Data for Figure 4.3, p. 150

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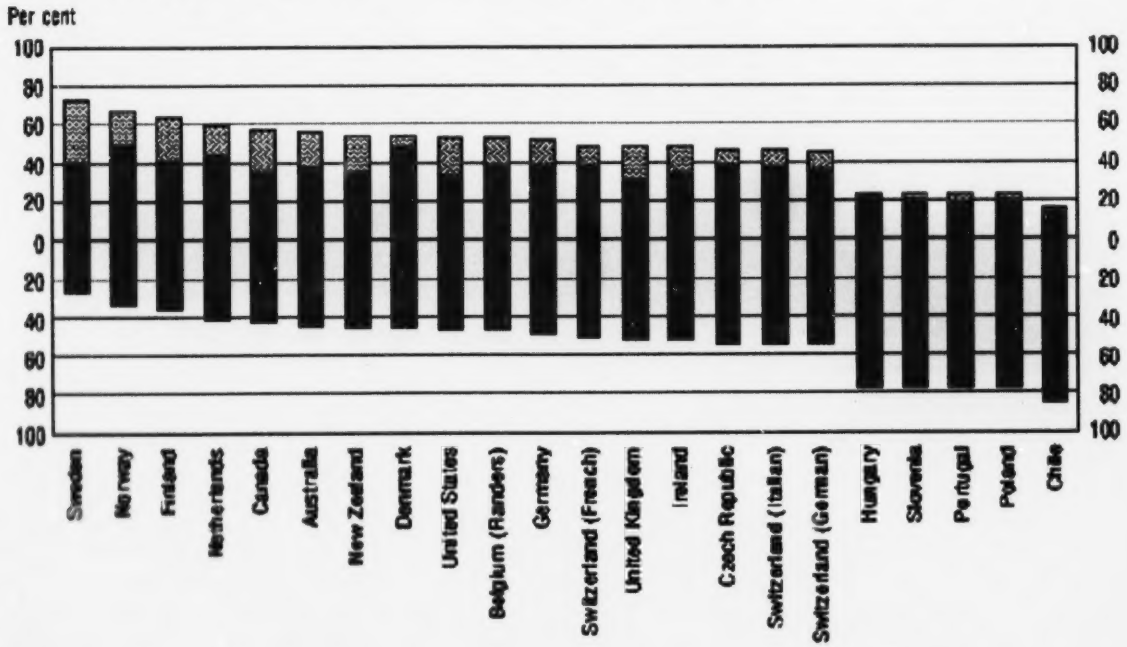
Figure 2

COMPARATIVE DISTRIBUTION OF LITERACY LEVELS

A. Per cent of population aged 16-65 at each prose literacy level, 1994-1998



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